

Calypso and the Blade

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Calypso and the Blade

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Techno's only concern was ageing out of his new foster home and somehow acquiring a dog before he got arrested again. Whilst Niki was more concerned over not dying on her twenty-first birthday to a curse she didn't understand nor want.

They had different priorities yet the two seem to help each other out in the end.

~ a prequel to 'His Curse of Binding', focusing on Techno and Niki.

Notes

thank you to user Elianlovescats and his friend for the idea!!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

You might not need to read 'His Curse of Binding' to understand this fic, but I've added little Easter eggs/details mentioned in that fic which are explained in this one, so I would suggest reading 'His Curse of Binding' before. But it's up to you to decide :D

This is set before Tommy is introduced to SBI and before Kristin's death. The narrative will be split between Techno and Niki.

* * *

T e c h n o

Like all mornings, Techno had woken up to a dog licking his face. Floof wasn't the most practical alarm clock but it worked. Though, this time he didn't appreciate the dog's affection —since Floof targeted the areas of Techno's face which had been, to put it simply, beaten to shit.

This was his seventh foster home with a bad neighbourhood so school fights, and even the occasional street fights, were normal. It didn't mean his foster mother liked it, or him for that matter. And that was why Floof was his favourite member of this household; a white, fluffy dog who never judged him when Techno came home from school with a black eye, split lip, bruised knuckles and a probable case of a dislocated shoulder. The other guy looked a whole lot worse, especially in that hospital gown he ended up needing to wear for his surgery.

Regardless, it was safe to say his third month in this house was not going so great. At least he dodged a restraining order against the guy solely because his foster mother was a lawyer, yet that offence would've been mild compared to the other statements on his file. Not that he deserved most of them. Despite how he paraded the whole 'violence is the only universal language' ideology, he was a product of that environment, it was something he learnt, not a way of living he *wanted* to live by. But it was the only way he was heard in this world.

Sighing, he got out of bed, ignoring the pain in his side and shoulder so he could give Floof the good petting the dog deserved. He grabbed his toothbrush from his duffle bag and buried it back in after he used it. Even though he had lived in this house for a while, he still hadn't unpacked anything. Blame it on the fear that Floof would chew into everything in there and also due to his hatred for this place.

Don't get him wrong, he wasn't abused or anything; no malnourishment, violation of human rights or simple immorality took place here. Techno just didn't like them. The mother's favourite colour was stripes, which was big enough of a red flag on its own, and she watched 'Loose Women' every day, where ignorant and overly paid middle-aged women gave their hot takes on things they shouldn't be talking about. His issues with her were inevitable.

He walked down the stairs expecting to see his foster mother watching reruns of that hellish show with a mug of fruit tea in her grasp, but not his social worker.

Lukas. Someone he *also* didn't like. Techno was solely an atheist because he refused to believe there was a higher being dumb enough to let Lukas exist, nonetheless give him a job that required comprehension skills and the ability to blink.

"What are you doing here?" Techno asked, clutching Floof tighter to his chest. He wanted to keep the dog as far away from Lukas as he could—he didn't know if idiocy and dumbassery could transmit between species.

Lukas, someone even more socially inept as him, flickered his eyes across the living room. Techno followed his movement and wasn't surprised to see his foster mother with signed papers in her hands and crocodile tears streaming down her face.

It only meant one thing: he was being sent back.

Instead of his eyes brimming with tears, anger curling in his fists or a drop in his stomach, he put down Floof and uttered the single word, "Why?"

He knew what her answer would be. But a little confirmation never hurt—it did, it *did* hurt but he tended to disregard that part. Amongst everything else.

"I don't feel safe in my own home anymore," his now ex-foster mother confessed, bottom lip trembling as if it pained *her* to say and not him, the person receiving it. His jaw clenched. "I can't fix this."

Techno went to pinch the bridge of his nose, already done with this woman and her failed saviour complex but stopped as she flinched back from him. He froze. She really—she really thought he would *hit* her. She—

He counted downwards in his head, surveying a new detail of the room at each number. He shouldn't get upset over this, over her. He can't.

"You hospitalised that poor boy!" she shouted, voice shrilled.

"I dropkicked that child in self-defence," he bit back.

His answer sent her into another fit of hysterical tears.

"I tried my hardest to be the best mother I could to you but it seems I failed," she continued to cry. The more she went on about her own problems with Techno's departure, the more he wanted this to be over. The hurtful side to her words had died the minute snot dripped from her nose—a horrible sight he couldn't take to heart.

Floof nestled his nose against Techno's leg.

Over everything, Techno was troubled by not being able to take Floof with him. This woman didn't deserve this dog, she didn't deserve *anything*. But just like with everything in Techno's life, none of it was fair.

It didn't take long for Techno to pack his bags, and that was because he only needed to check nothing had been stolen and then just pick them up. Once he was certain that his box of pink hair dye and bleach was in there—things his foster mother used to hide from him—he zipped it up and followed Lukas to the car.

As he grabbed the car door handle, it didn't feel right. He couldn't leave just like *that*. He bit his lip and turned back to face the front door, where his ex-foster mother stood.

Techno made his way closer. The woman at the door opened her arms for a goodbye, tears still swelling in her eyes, but he swerved out the way. Instead, he reached down to give Floof one last head-pat.

"I will always remember your loyalty, so don't worry, one day I'll replace you," he whispered to the dog, hugging him close. "Be comforted by that," he added for good measure.

He stood up straight, eyeing his ex-foster mother's displeasure and simply walked back to the car without another word said.

Like he stated earlier, the woman deserved nothing. Especially not from him.

* * *

As incompetent as Lukas was, Techno didn't expect him to find another foster family so quickly. But here he was, still nurturing a dislocated shoulder and cut-up face, standing in front of what seemed like one of those houses that would cost millions in California but a hundred dollars a week in Texas.

He took out his earphones and trailed behind Lukas to the door. The man had explained on the way here details of this house, the foster parents, their son who wasn't that much younger than Techno, and the town itself. For a town called Snowchester, it didn't really snow that much. They sounded like a normal family, a domestic one. But he said the same about house six and he left that family with a lot more marks on his body than he entered with.

Lukas knocked on the door—well, he *slapped* the door with his palm instead of using his knuckles to hit the wood, like a weirdo. This entire shit-show just made Techno want to age out of the system even faster or claim emancipation and get a shitty job that exploited runaways and orphans.

At least he wasn't an orphan. His biological parents were alive, but prison suited them well. He burnt every letter they posted, not letting their guilt-ridden words see the light of day.

The door sprang open and a shorter boy with brown hair and circular glasses came into the frame.

"For fuck's sake, he's taller than me as well!" was what greeted him. And then the boy ran off deeper into the house, leaving the door wide open.

Another person stepped into view; a tanned woman with hair as dark as midnight and a smile conveying the ripping opposite. "Ignore him, he's being extra insecure this evening. Please, you must be Lukas and Technoblade, come in."

Unlike with the other foster parents in the past who welcomed him inside, where he would normally stand there awkwardly, glowing up at them to see a flicker of irritation in their eyes, Techno listened to her. It was weird. The woman had a strange authority, one he didn't want to cross nor tempt, but it wasn't threatening. Quite the opposite, actually.

"I'm Kristin," she introduced, laying a hand on her chest as she did so, "and this is my son, Wilbur, and my husband Phil."

Wilbur, the glasses guy, didn't make his abhorrence for him subtle. The boy practically glared holes into the side of Techno's head. But he preferred passive remarks of distaste to kicks to the stomach and being spat in the face—not that this guy could do anything like that to him anyway. Whereas Phil looked like the physical representation of walking on eggshells around people. This usually wouldn't be a *bad* thing, per se, with how Phil carefully crafted his friendly expression and calm demeanour, presenting no threats or reasons to be on edge. In fact, it would be helpful for kids from violent homes. But Techno didn't trust appearances.

Lukas nudged his shoulder, reminding him of the Kinoko Fostering Care etiquette. But Techno wasn't one for appeasing inadequate adults so he shoved Lukas back at a force ten times harder. Lukas winced and rubbed his arm.

"Anyway," Lukas began, still clutching onto his arm. "Is it okay if I speak to you two alone?" he asked, gesturing to Kristin and Phil.

The three moved into the kitchen, leaving Techno and Wilbur alone.

"You don't want me here," Techno stated, wanting to get this over with.

"Yep," Wilbur agreed as he crossed his arms. "But Mum wants you, so..."

Techno scoffed to himself. He had been in this situation before, where families don't let their children decide whether they should foster. It never ended well.

"Hey!" Wilbur exclaimed. "It's not my fault I didn't want a foster brother with an American voice as deep as the Mariana Trench."

He furrowed his eyebrows. "Would you prefer if I had a higher-pitched voice?"

“No!”

“Then why bring up my voice?”

Wilbur didn’t answer and instead chose to glare at him again. He thought Lukas said Wilbur was only a couple of months younger than him, making him fifteen, rather than a couple of years. He acted like one of those five-year-olds in the Chuck-E-Cheese arcade section whenever their childish gambling resulted in no prizes.

“Look, you don’t want to be here, I don’t want you here, let’s have a truce on our shared hatred for this entire thing,” Wilbur proposed. “I’m not going to be an excessive dickhead to you since, no offence, you look dead enough as it is.”

“None taken.”

“*And because Dad promised me a new Tamagotchi if I behaved,*”

Again, this was a fifteen-year-old. Maybe it was because Techno never got to experience the healthy childhood of Tamagotchi’s—whatever those were—and parental love, but it all seemed so foreign to him. All he knew were narrow dodges to avoid impending hits, backhanded phrases of ‘affection’ from foster parents with saviour complexes and the bloodlust in his head that wouldn’t go away. It was his anger that ruined every house, his own actions, whether it was out of self-defence or not, that made him pack his bags and sit in Lukas’ car again. Every single time.

He didn’t know yet which member of this household would be on the receiving end of it.

“Are you coming with or not?” Wilbur said as he snapped his fingers in front of his face.

Scratch that, Wilbur would be on the receiving end if he didn’t get his hands out of his face.

“Come on, I need to show you around the house.”

Reluctantly, he followed Wilbur.

“What’s up with the block game décor?” Techno asked, frowning at another framed picture of a pixel house on the staircase wall.

“It’s my Mum’s Minecraft builds. Dad frames them,” Wilbur said, a smile loaming on his face as he stared at a specific one.

“What’s Minecraft?”

“It’s the reason we can afford this house,” Wilbur said.

“Thank you for flaunting your wealth, that explains everything.”

Wilbur scowled. “It’s a video game that my Dad made.”

Techno perked up. He always liked video games but never got the chance to own a console to play them when he wanted. Yet, he hid his interest quickly. He didn't want this house to use it against him. Though, at some point, he'd steal Wilbur's console and try out the game.

They reached the upstairs and Wilbur stopped. "You get to choose which room you have," he said, waving towards the two doors that didn't have any decorations on them.

Wilbur's door had a picture stuck on it. A child-like painting drawn in crayons resembling Wilbur and Kristin sitting side-by-side on a bench admiring a badly coloured sunset. So, as one would, Techno examined the empty room furthest away from Wilbur.

Yet, the second he saw the suicide windows installed and the ugly curtains, he walked straight out. He'd prefer not to be baked alive during the summer. Only an idiot would willingly choose the first. But that meant the only other choice was the room next to Wilbur's.

"If you play your music loud enough so I can hear it through the walls, consider our truce and everything else gone," he threatened as he placed his duffle bag at the end of his new bed.

"What counts under 'everything else'?" Wilbur asked, concerned. Techno ignored him. "You better not mean me, right?" his silence continued and Wilbur grew more concerned.
"Technoblade, surely you didn't just threaten me, right?"

Thankfully, Phil calling them back downstairs halted Wilbur's panic. The two rushed downstairs—well, *Wilbur* rushed whilst Techno quietly ambled behind him, amused—and to Techno's delight, Lukas wasn't here anymore. He wouldn't have to see that dumb little look on his face for a while.

"I thought we could go over house rules during dinner," Phil said, a hesitant smile on his lips.

Techno's mood instantly soured. He hated family dinners, or family anything.

"Or not," Phil quickly added. "Or we could *not* do that." Techno didn't think his disapproval over his suggestion was obvious, but according to that, it was.

It was obvious this was this family's first rodeo with foster care.

"Can we do this tomorrow?" Techno asked. "I'm tired." He wasn't, but he was tired of *this*.

Phil hastily nodded. "Yeah, of course mate. We'll go over what's going to happen this week as well since we need to get you some more supplies."

He stayed silent and walked back up the stairs, hating the stares on his back. Techno closed his door shut, stared at the duffle bag at the end of his bag and left it zipped up. He pushed open his windows and did what any other person would do and scaled down the building until the grass softened his landing.

He needed a break from this house, from their domesticity, bright smiles and Wilbur's- well, whatever Wilbur had going on. As it was nearing winter, it was already dark outside, so his want for a dark stroll around an isolated town could be achieved.

It was peaceful. For a while, at least.

He stumbled across a figure in the distance standing beneath a statue. A girl with hair blonde enough to stand out in the darkness stared up at the bronze statue of some founding father or president. Two different flowers lay crushed in her tight grip; one magenta and the other a bright yellow.

She threw the flowers at the feet of the statue and stormed away. Her choked sobs and sniffing echoed with every drop of a shedding leaf.

When she eventually left the park, Techno approached the statue. He skimmed the reading on the plaque, something about the founder of Snowchester, Tobias Underscore, and picked up the abandoned flowers.

Petunias and daffodils.

A bouquet of chilling resentment and anger oppressed by forgiveness in its new beginning and rebirth. Bittersweet forgiveness laid in Techno's hands. A familiar weight.

With that, he called it a day and returned back to his room.

But not before ransacking the kitchen for snacks. He didn't want to be hungry in the morning after he'd turn down Phil's offer for him to join them for breakfast, which was inevitable with domesticated families like these. Disrupting the normalcy they had as they ate their toast and cereal was not something he felt like doing.

As he pocketed another Hershey's bar, the kitchen became colder. Despite how he never turned the light on, it got darker—eerier, susceptible to negligence and gloom. He shivered and turned to go back upstairs and froze in his step.

A cloaked shadow stood in the way of the door. Their hand reached forward and light sparked in the kitchen.

Oh. It was Kristin in a dressing gown.

"Um," he muttered as his ears reddened. Nothing could stop her from stepping forward and doing whatever she pleased. He was *stealing* from her kitchen. Punishment was the bare minimum. She could raise her fist and cave it anywhere and no one would object, because no one was *here* and—

"Can I have one of those Hershey's?" her soft voice interrupted his thoughts. His shoulders sagged. No threats, no shouting, no crocodile tears over how he had committed theft of all crimes, destroying their little mission to save his soul from a cycle of violence bred in the system. No. Kristin just wanted some of the chocolate currently clutched to his chest. "I'm ordering some more tomorrow."

Techno placed a bar on the kitchen island surface and pushed it towards her. Kristin picked it up and smiled nimbly, "Thank you," she said. "Goodnight."

And that was it.

God, this family was stranger than the house with a taxidermy business. He had to sleep in a room with a boar stapled to the wall and a pig rug beneath his feet but at least he understood what lines he couldn't cross.

Here it was a minefield and he had no idea where to step forward. A place where sleep didn't come naturally.

* * *

N i k i

Unlike most people her age, Niki had a reason for not being able to use a cell phone. It was a mixture of growing up in a poor area in Germany and also the fact that she was last born in the early 1500s due to a four-century long curse binding her to rebirth and cyclical guesses of Greek myths.

Understandably, when you go from dying on a battlefield before electricity was discovered and gain consciousness at the beginning of the twenty-first century, ways of life did not transfer that well.

She was only reborn twice, with this life included, so outdated beliefs, the nuanced technology and many references to popular culture confused her.

If you asked her what her favourite TV show was, she'd probably describe the weird programme she watched on the plane ride over to the UK—a nature documentary with an old, sweet man as the narrator named David.

Either way, Niki had her curse to blame for this, and for many other things as well, like deep-rooted trauma, trust issues, nightmares, a scar over her heart and a tattoo on her wrist.

With the curse, myths dictated events in your life and Calypso so happened to be her first—*Nihachu's* first. The nymph, imprisoned on an island, destined to fall in love with those who will always leave her in some way, whether through death or their willing departure. And despite centuries passing, the burden didn't cease. If anything, those years in the void, in the emptiness with her fellow cursed, made it worse.

"Niki! Breakfast's ready!"

She rubbed her eyes, hoping that some food in her system would distract the longing sense of loneliness that had followed her for years. Though, now that crippled loneliness had a new friend: paranoia. She had run away from Germany for a reason yet her fears had travelled with her. Festering under her pillows, hiding in her harsh grasp of the bed covers. No matter how many miles she was away from that *man*, his weighted gaze never left.

“Niki, you’ll be late!” her mother continued to shout. Well, it was her adoptive mother, but she was a nice woman. There was no need for a separation between the two terms. After all, this family had saved her from the grips of that man and his hunt for her.

Grudgingly, Niki finished getting ready for school and joined the table. They were still new to her despite living with them for a month. Everything was still new. Even the concept of school—she wasn’t allowed to go before because of her history. Apparently being stalked and surviving an attempted kidnapping took tolls on your mental health and a therapist needed to sign her off for returning to school.

She sat down in her normal seat, on the right corner opposite her parents and next to her brother, Tubbo. He was nice too. Well, ignoring how he treated her like dog-shit for the first week. Her adoption wasn’t planned or wanted by every person in this household and Tubbo made that *very* clear. She was a parasite to him, taking up space in the house, sucking the attention away from him and making it all about *her*.

His passive disapproval of her entire existence, his rejection of any conversation she attempted, hurt. The curling isolation reminded her of Calypso. Something she wanted to forget.

Niki didn’t blame him though. He was twelve, an only child used to constant attention. A new child, two years older, disrupted that. Yet, just because she understood his anger didn’t mean she wasted any opportunity of tripping him down the stairs and giving him two forks when it was her turn to set up the table. Small things to piss him off.

However now, Tubbo was better. Still distant at times and insensitive but he was trying and that was all she asked for. All it took was her snapping at him in German and a rant of how much of a prick he was being to her—sure he did cry at the confrontation but the little shit deserved it.

“Morning,” Tubbo greeted as he fed Benson another piece of corn. Oh yeah, he had a duck called Benson. “Where did you go last night, by the way?”

She stilled in her seat. He wasn’t supposed to know about that.

It was supposed to be a secret visit, one for the sake of her sanity and splintered process of healing. But with the way she walked home in the pitch-black, crying until her head hit her pillows, it wasn’t very successful.

She had visited Tobias’ statue. Her ex-President and murderer. The man who let her die in the Last War and abandoned their dying country just to make another one. Her first life crossed over with the history of this town and the peoples’ love for Tobias, the founder of Snowchester, chilled the scar over her heart.

It had taken her *years* in the void to even get to grips to say his name aloud. Even at the mention of him, she felt that crossbow pierce through her and remembered what it was like to die on a pile of the dead; their different uniforms irrelevant to Death’s wishes.

She thought those flowers on his statue would help, that it would ease the pain and ready the peace she chased for. But it didn't. Niki had accepted what he did to her centuries ago, when he was still in the void with her, though that didn't mean it hurt any less.

"I didn't tell Mum or Dad, don't worry, and they can't hear us from the kitchen," he clarified, yet it didn't ease her panic.

"I needed some fresh air last night," she lied as she took a sip of water. She needed to remain calm. Tubbo may still irritate her on purpose sometimes, like antagonising Benson to the point where the duck would try to eat her ankles, but he wasn't malicious.

Tubbo nodded and went back to eating his breakfast. "Are you walking with me and Ranboo or is Mum driving you to school?"

"Mum is driving me," she said.

"Alright, I'll see you later then," and with that, he rushed to leave the house before their parents tried to fix his tie or rub the mud out of his trousers. A common occurrence in this household.

She sighed and took a bite out of the cherries in her fruit bowl but it tasted like lead on her tongue. They came from the laurel tree in the garden. The weighted gaze of that man she escaped heaved.

Her hands curled into fists under the table. She needed to figure out her myth of this life soon. Only seven years left to guess.

* * *

The tour around her new school was not one she expected.

It was done by another student in her year, who was bald despite being aged fourteen to fifteen, and Niki struggled to understand his accent as he spoke—the thick midlands accent coincided with the British slang she did not recognise made it impossible to translate.

But that wasn't just it, another new student to the school joined them on the tour. He was in the year above, year eleven, and hadn't spoken a single word. The older boy just stood there, silent the entire time, glowering. At least his dyed pink hair looked nice.

She had managed to get through the day without any problems. Well, that was until she was taken out of her geography class to have a meeting with her assigned school counsellor. It had been an hour of her avoiding any questions that asked about Germany, or the tattoo of Zagreus on her wrist, or how she was settling in. She didn't want help in the form of an adult paid too little to care about the mental health of the students they had been assigned. Niki knew that the moment she left that office, the school counsellor wouldn't give a shit about her, wouldn't spare her another thought throughout the week, until she next turned up.

The weight of eyes and the overwhelming presence of people worsened after her talk with that counsellor. The second she stepped back into the corridor, it all came crashing down. If it wasn't for Jack Manifold, the boy who gave her the tour, noticing and talking to her, then she would've been elsewhere in her head. Somewhere darker.

It took a while for her to finally understand his accent and he even taught her some of the slang he commonly used. But of course, just like with everything in her life, another problem occurred.

"Niki!" Tubbo shouted, dragging her towards him and interrupting her conversation. His cheeks were red and eyes wide with distress. "It's Ranboo," he began, heaving, "these guys tried to take his mask off and—"

"Where is he?" she asked urgently. He tugged her along, pushing past the bigger crowds and shoulders of people.

As they ran, she managed to put more rings on her fingers. She may not have the same strength as she did in her first life, but regardless of reincarnation and being younger, she could still pack a punch.

Tubbo led her to a field. But it didn't look like Ranboo needed Niki for protection and defence. The same student who stayed silent during the tour, the older one with pink hair, had his fist hurtling towards the boys who harassed Ranboo. Specks of blood stained onto his fists, yet that didn't deter him from decking the other to the floor and stamping on the boy's own glasses.

"Technoblade!" another older boy yelled as he attempted to stop the pink-haired boy—Technoblade—from throwing another punch. "He's down, leave it."

Techno flexed his fist and shrugged off the hands on him. The taller one scoffed and picked up Ranboo's sunglasses. He walked back to Ranboo and fit the sunglasses back on his face.

"I'm fine, Wilbur." Niki heard Ranboo mutter. Wilbur said something back and then returned to Techno, who was busy glaring down at the boy he had knocked to the floor.

Niki pushed through more people to reach Ranboo. Tubbo rested his hand on Ranboo's arm, pulling him away from the other students surrounding them.

"What if we get you some goggles?" Niki suggested, not liking how easy it was to rattle Ranboo. The single action of stealing away his sunglasses made him like *this*; vulnerable and exposed. "Harder for people to take it off you."

"He'd look like that crazy scientist from 'Back to the Future,'" Tubbo teased, wanting to see the stiffness in Ranboo's shoulders ease.

Ranboo sniffed but bit out a laugh. "I'll get some goggles then."

"Imagine cosplaying an old person."

"Imagine cosplaying Tweek from 'South Park'—"

“Shut up!” Tubbo shouted and Ranboo’s amusement seemed a bit more genuine.

Niki excused herself and got closer to Techno.

“Dad’s gonna be pissed,” Wilbur said, loud enough for her to overhear.

Techno shrugged at him, the same deadpanned expression on his face. So they were brothers then.

“This is where you speak,” Wilbur stated, his condescending tone bled with bemusement.

With an eyebrow raise, Techno typed something into his phone and handed it to Wilbur. As he read it, Wilbur glared at him. “Even the way you insult people is American, Jesus Christ,” he grumbled. “Do you have a return label?”

Techno stifled a chuckle and shook his head. Wilbur grinned and gave him back his phone. “Anyway, expect Dad to give you some kind of speech whilst my Mum advises you on how to fight better. You won’t escape her pointers.”

As Techno let Wilbur pull him away, he locked eyes with Niki. There was a flash of red in them, hidden deep in the brown. Then he looked away.

It took ten minutes for a video of the fight to spread, an hour for Technoblade to be a known name amongst the school, and a week for it to be one they feared.

* * *

T e c h n o

Surprisingly, the talk Phil gave Techno didn’t end up in Lukas turning up at their doorstep, papers in his hands, and a car with enough petrol to drive him all the way back to Kinoko Foster Care’s base. Sure, Phil reprimanded him, told him things like how this type of behaviour would get him kicked out and the other school in this town was a shit-hole so it was wise to *not* do that.

But then Kristin took over the conversation with her questions. Not questions like, ‘Oh, did you do this to get over that lingering anger you can never get rid of, the bloodlust and violence always yearning to be reaped?’ then followed by, ‘Did that fight satisfy it or are you still hollow inside?’. They were very specific questions yet Techno never wanted to admit to being true.

No, her questions were about whether he tucked his thumbs into his fists as he punched or if he kicked more with his leg or his foot. The entire ordeal ended up with Techno learning a new fighting technique, so in his opinion, it went well.

Wilbur didn’t think so.

“Oh so when I break a kid’s nose, I get grounded and my Tamagotchi is taken away, but Techno gets fighting lessons?” he complained.

Phil sighed, almost as if he expected his behaviour. “Wilbur, that kid did nothing wrong to you—”

“He said Marvel was better than Hamilton!”

Phil sighed again and glanced over to Kristin, who just shrugged, giving him a look resembling, ‘This is your problem, not mine’. Techno’s lip twitched, amused.

As Kristin laughed at Phil’s exasperation, her necklace untucked. It was a symbol. Techno frowned. The symbol looked Greek or Cyrillic. She quickly tucked it back under her shirt, her smile twisted into something tight-lipped and tense. He could’ve sworn he saw it glow.

“I just remembered I have a shift at the office, sorry Phil I forgot,” she gasped, her new smile didn’t match her eyes.

Phil nodded, although still displayed his annoyance at having to deal with an upset Wilbur alone. “I’ll leave you a serving of dinner in the fridge.”

She kissed him on the cheek and dashed out of the house, grabbing a case before she went. Why would she need a case that looked as if it could hide a pole inside for an office job?

It worried him when Kristin came back home after work, appearing more tired than before. Too drained for only a couple of hours spent at a desk in front of a computer. She walked in, her back hunched and eyes darker, and stilled when she noticed Techno stirring a cup of coffee at the kitchen island.

They had an unintentional routine of meeting in the kitchen during the night.

“Are you okay?” he asked, not sure why he even cared about the woman’s health. He had known her for a week, he shouldn’t *care*.

“Just had to deal with an annoying customer over the phone,” Kristin explained, voice strained. He clicked down on the kettle so it would boil again, knowing that she’d need something hot to soften her throat.

She nodded, appreciative, at him and took a seat. “I have something for you,” she said. “I remember you looked interested at the book shop when we went out to get you some supplies, so I bought you this.”

Kristin placed a book on the kitchen surface and pushed it over to him. He stared down at the cover for a minute before picking it up.

Its cover read ‘The Art of War’ by Sun Tzu.

“Why?” he uttered quietly.

“I thought you’d like it,” Kristin said as she made herself a cup of hot chocolate.

Techno had never been gifted anything before. His stifled behaviours, the way he’d hide his perked interest or any inkling of emotion whenever something occurred; no one had commented on them before or even acted towards them. She had observed his want to go into that shop and explore the aisles of books until the shopping mall closed, and bought something. For *him*.

“Thank you,” Techno whispered.

“*The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting,*” she quoted with a warm smile. “You might learn something.”

“Is this your way of telling me to not get into any more fights?”

“Only the unneeded ones,” she clarified. “Have a nice read, Techno.”

He was caught up in the book in his hands, the quote ringing in his head, and the quiet of the kitchen that he hadn’t even noticed she had called him *Techno*.

A nickname.

* * *

School wasn’t so bad when every student knew to keep a two-metre distance away from you. Techno didn’t thrive on violence or the perceived fear he created, but the minimal social interaction was a plus.

He arrived early in his science lesson and waited for everyone else to turn up. These lessons were probably the most interesting. Not because he was invested in the intricacies of ionic bonds or what colour potassium burned (it was lilac, by the way), but because of the two guys who sat in front of him—they made it interesting.

Techno guessed pretty early on, from the first look at him, that the boy was the class clown. Yet not in the ‘I’m a narcissist who wants all the attention’ type way, but more of an ‘I want to make people laugh at the expense of my best friend’s sanity and your education’.

His name was Skeppy and the poor friend he kept irritating every hour in science was Bad. Two weird names but Techno couldn’t complain—his birth name was Technoblade the Third, after all.

Now, Techno hadn’t said a word this entire week. He didn’t even answer his own name for attendance and rather relied on his teacher repeating his name, looking up from the register to see him staring blankly at them, and having the teacher sigh and tick him as present. Despite him not talking, he knew a lot about this school.

He knew the groups, the areas you shouldn't go unless you wanted to start something with a lower or higher year, what foods to not touch from the canteen unless a stomach virus was something you loved to have, and what students in his year to avoid.

Skeppy was not one of them. He made it practically impossible to ignore his presence with his loud and extreme nature; boisterous cackling, rage-like screaming and what he liked to call 'trolling'. The term was kinda cringe, but it did accurately explain what Skeppy did.

Like now, for the example, with whatever Skeppy was doing to the glue sticks in period three science. Arriving early like Techno, Skeppy had taken every glue stick off his table, placed them in his bag, and left one his own glue stick which had been coated in another substance.

Techno hoped to God that the substance was another form of glue and not the lubricator he was thinking of. He didn't know why Skeppy was doing it, but he feared for Bad when he eventually needed a glue stick in this class.

Five minutes later, Bad showed up. Unfortunately for Skeppy, he didn't need a glue stick until forty minutes had passed.

Techno eyed the glue stick and looked down at the cut-up paper he needed to stick into his notebook. "Hey," he poked Skeppy in the back, "can I borrow that?" he pointed at the glue stick and Skeppy, although having the reputation for being a pest, was a nice person so he picked it up to give it to him.

Though, he instantly regretted it and threw it to the ground, wiping his hands on Bad's blazer with disgust. Techno grinned.

"You knew," Skeppy accused, ignoring Bad's own disgust at being used as a tissue. "You did this on purpose."

"I just wanted some glue, man," Techno said, still grinning.

"Skeppy stop terrorising the new kid," Bad interjected.

"But he—"

"Skeppy."

"Just wait until we have P.E together," Skeppy groaned, glaring at him.

If it was supposed to be a threat, then Techno was far from threatened. Rather than quivering in his chair or shaking to his core, he was ecstatic—not that he showed this—because he had just gained another person he could morally bully. Wilbur was still at the top of the list though.

* * *

As Techno attempted to find a book on Greek and Cyrillic symbols in the school library, he couldn't ignore whatever was going in the next aisle. It was the girl he was with for the school tour, Niki he believed, being bothered by two guys in her year.

He frowned and grabbed the heaviest book he could from the shelf before walking towards them. He dropped it on the floor, creating a massive bang.

The three looked over to him and the two boys had the decency to flinch backwards when they recognised him. He walked closer, having no intention to hit or harm them—at least not yet—but they didn't know this. At his third step, the boys ran off, leaving a disturbed Niki behind.

“Are you alright?” he asked as he picked up the book from the floor.

“You’re American?”

He blinked at her, more confused than anything. “Y’know, a normal person in this situation would say thank you rather than question someone’s nationality.”

“This is the first time I’ve heard you speak, give me a break!” she exclaimed light-heartedly. He couldn’t blame her for that. “What if I buy you lunch as a thank you then?”

Techno’s face furrowed. “Have you *seen* the food this school produces?”

“Okay fine,” she said, “I know a café nearby.”

She set off and looked back when he didn’t follow her. Niki gestured for him and he moved. Was he currently being adopted by an extrovert? Because he hoped so.

They managed to sneak out of the school and found a free booth in the café Niki told him about. It looked nice, homely even, and it was only five minutes away from his foster home.

“How come you moved here?” Niki asked, not afraid to be blunt with him.

“Foster family,” he grunted out as he bit into his food. There was no shame in it. She looked surprised but in an understanding way. He tilted his head at her. “Adopted or foster care?”

Niki squirmed in her seat, almost as if she was unnerved at how he guessed. “Adopted.”

A silence fell between them, one filled with timid awareness. Eyes assessed each other, trying to read the other as discreetly as possible, yet both knew of their intentions.

“Are they good to you?” Techno asked.

“The best,” she said, tightly.

He knew that tone. He practically lived in it. The family wasn’t violent, they didn’t hurt her but it was different. No immediate clicking or desire for them to send her back. It was almost

a limbo, waiting for the shoe to drop or the attachment to begin. And for Techno, that attachment never happened.

“You?”

“The same.”

Recognition flashed in her eyes. They stood at an understanding. He wasn’t pressured to speak or fill the pauses, but he still did. The two quipped in at random times about obscure facts about themselves, their thoughts about the families they currently lived with or vague experiences in the system. He had never shared any of this before, but with her, someone who comprehended every word he said, it felt natural.

“Do you ever feel like you need to repay your parents?” Niki questioned. “Your foster parents in this case.”

He frowned and shook his head. “No. I don’t owe them anything,” he said, though rephrased when she seemed distressed by his up-front answer. “But it’s probably different for you then, with adoption.”

She fiddled with the many bracelets around her wrists. “I feel like I need to make it up to them for taking me in and saving me from that situation,” she didn’t elaborate and Techno didn’t expect her to. “Like, they paid for my plane ticket, somehow succeeded with the German government and its shit adoption system. It took them so much time and money to get me here and...”

“You don’t want to be indebted to them,” he supplied.

Niki nodded, sombre.

“Mine feels too much like an already complete family,” Techno revealed, not wanting her to be vulnerable alone. “A happily married couple and their prodigal son,” he continued, bitterness bled onto his tongue. “They don’t need me there to mess it all up.”

“We both have problems to overcome then, don’t we?” she said yet her words carried more weight. As if she had more secrets and burdens under her sleeve that she wanted to spill but kept screwed shut.

He agreed and sipped on his drink.

As she reached over for a napkin, her sleeve rolled up. A tattoo—a Greek symbol, coincidentally. He quickly averted his eyes, both respecting her privacy and because he didn’t want to look like a creep. At least it confirmed something to him, a growing thought: she was just like him. An outcast, new to town, different in *some* way—whether that meant festering anger or illegal tattoos.

“How do you get to school?” he asked.

“I walk.”

“No,” he stated, stifling a smile.

“What do you mean?”

“*We* walk,” he corrected.

She beamed as she understood. “Meet at the big tree?”

Techno concealed his smile, though it was getting harder to do, and nodded.

He had made a friend that day.

Chapter 2

* * *

N i k i

The man was back. At every corner she turned, every window she gazed into, every street corner she passed, he was there.

With hair as bright as the sun and a soul as dark as Tartarus, his hunt persisted.

No matter how far she ran, the intricate nature of her paths or untraceable hiding places, he found her.

The lead hatred in her heart eroded at every freeing breath she took whenever she could peer over her shoulder and not see that man. But it did not last. Her safety, her solace, just like the curse on her arm, was on a time limit. Even on the plane to her new adoptive family, promised that the man was in prison, away from her, the paranoia didn't leave.

"Looks like I found you," a male voice rasped, his lips brushed against the shell of her ear.

And the plane walls swallowed her whole.

She woke up. But it was far too dark to be her room. Shadows acted as an oppressive force rather than a state devoid of light. Dread seeped in. She knew where she was. The place that never let her rest.

The void.

Yet, she shouldn't be here. It stopped being a void when everyone else cursed had figured out their myths and died a mortal life, starting with Tobias and ending with Fundy. So it must be a memory.

A body flung towards her, blood splattered in the shadows. She caught it- caught *him*.

W. Soot. Her General, her ex-President and ex-friend. The leader who abandoned her with his terrorism of L'manberg and betrayed the first promise ever said to her in any life—that he wouldn't *leave*. But he did. Even in the void, he left too.

"Soot!" she cried out, combing the matted curls out of his face so the bloodied man could see.

He had just failed another life. Red covered him, drenched his clothes, his skin and his eyes. But he didn't look in pain.

She shrugged off her confusion and rushed to the fountain to get him clean. Niki held him close as he muttered things under his breath, clipped phrases of numbers, of lists and a certain bleeding name. Tommy. No matter his absence in the void, W. Soot never let his little brother be forgotten. Not by anyone here, not by himself.

“What was your myth this time?” she asked as she wiped the red clots off his trench coat.

“Ixion,” W. Soot answered gravely.

The king who violated promises, Godly rules of hospitality, and a second chance. Bounded to an ever-spinning wheel of fire for eternity for his crimes—a wheel that eventually fell from the sky and into the depths of Tartarus.

Her stomach clenched at his named myth, but she didn’t let her head wonder at what he must have done to earn that title.

“Another king?” Niki said with the tilt of her head.

W. Soot chuckled dryly. “*Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair,*” he quoted, each syllable reflecting the cuts in his soul. Niki hadn’t heard those words before; she hadn’t heard any literature, not since her first death. “Instead of the king of kings, I am their killer,” he said as if it explained it all—which it did. Ixion’s atrocities crossed no boundaries but the cold tone of the words spoken irked her. As if there was something else to them, another reason it remained true.

She continued cleaning the blood off his clothes in silence. To remain oblivious was a blessing.

“Niki,” he said and chills breached her back.

W. Soot never called her Niki, it was always Nihachu to him. She didn’t remember this part of the memory. She could recall this moment down to every break he took. This wasn’t a part of it.

“Why do you always help me when I’m the one who abandoned you?” he murmured, the twisted mess on his lips betraying the softness in his voice.

She froze. The water dampening her hands iced.

“You’ve never loved anyone since us, since me. You’ve never looked at anyone and wanted them to stay, for them to become your family and gain your trust,” he began to cackle. “I’ve ruined you.”

No, no this didn’t happen. This memory ended with him hugging her, both smiling, grateful for their presence in this cursed isolation. There were no malicious grins or biting tones. None of this happened—

“How does it feel that no matter how many times you relive these memories, you’ll never remember those moments where someone cared for you?” he questioned mockingly. Her breathing hastened, chest heaving to a rhythm too quick to survive with. “And not because

your memory is faulty, but because..." he paused and smiled, "but because there are no memories of that."

"Stop it," she shuddered, her voice breaking. "Stop."

"Why?" he asked, cruel laughter riddling in his questions. "Does the truth hurt harder than your island, Calypso?"

"Stop," she begged, tears blurring her vision, "please."

W. Soot stood up, drops of blood dripped on the floor. The shadows absorbed the red.

"Destined to fall in love with those who will never return it," his hand cupped her cheek. "You'll pour your heart into people for the compassion to remain unrequited. They'll never care as much as you do," the touch stung. "Even with your new myth, Niki, Calypso's punishment follows you."

The tattoo on her wrist scratched open, black painting her arm.

Tears soaked her face. Hands that steadily cleaned blood minutes prior lay shaking by her side. She knew what he said was true, that every word held a knife that itched itself over the scar on her heart. But denial tasted sweet on her tongue.

"I'll give you a hug, Nihachu. How's that?" W. Soot offered, even using her *name*, just like old times.

She craved the touch, yearned for comfort from the first person she followed and trusted. Her leader, saviour and deserter all wrapped in one. If it wasn't for him and his proclaims of independence, she would have never died on that battlefield. If she didn't follow L'manberg, she would have died of old age, never attached to a curse that never let her rest or die in peace.

Niki opened up her arms for him and had never hated herself more.

Hands enclosed around her, clutching her close to his chest. She didn't care that blood smudged her cheeks. He was *holding* her.

But something was wrong. The void laughed in the face of her comfort and she stiffened in the perceived grip.

His body was cold.

She opened her eyes and gagged. A sword lodged in his chest, a deathly pale face, lacking life, the smell of rotting flesh and dirt, and his body sagged against her.

It was his corpse.

Screams rattled her throat, echoing her loneliness into an empty bedroom.

She choked on sobs, on the betrayal that scarred her heart, and *broke*. It didn't matter that she was awake now, no longer bound by a corrupted memory reminding her of everything she repressed, it was still there.

A solitude that wormed into her skin and trickled through the cracks of her skeleton.

Niki laid under her covers. Trembling and alone—just like Calypso had destined for her.

* * *

Still shaken from her nightmare, Niki stood by the big tree, waiting for Techno. Breakfast had been awkward since she refused to speak, bile blighting her tongue. Tubbo had stared at her the entire time with a blend of concern and interest. She couldn't eat anything, not even the cherries from the laurel tree; her appetite was ruined by the words living in her head.

"Destined to fall in love with those who will never return it," he said in that void—and he couldn't have spoken any truer words.

She blinked and Tubbo appeared in front of her, hand fiddling with his backpack.

"Did you have a nightmare last night?" Tubbo asked at last.

She cleared her throat, trying to keep the sickness inside of her at bay. "No."

"Then why did you scream?"

"A spider," she lied.

"A spider?"

"A big one."

Tubbo squirmed in disgust. "Is it dead?"

She could still feel the weight of his body.

"He's dead," she muttered, cold.

"Oh," Tubbo exhaled. He paused and grabbed something from his pocket. It was a breakfast bar. "Here, in case you're hungry before break."

Niki stared down at the item in her hand and looked back up to Tubbo. "Thank you."

He ran off quickly and Techno took his place. He had styled his hair differently today, the pink messily braided to the right side rather than the left.

"A snack before Enrichment?" Techno said, gesturing to the breakfast bar.

She had forgotten about Enrichment. Every Wednesday, years ten and eleven had an hour of Enrichment, a randomly assigned activity that Niki and Techno so happened to have together. It was gardening. Although Techno hated it in the beginning, he now adored it. The once so-called boring activity relieved the strains in his shoulders and stiffness in his back. All because of the shovel in his hands and the potatoes he needed to plant.

Whilst Niki catered the watering side to gardening, Techno dominated the fields, digging and ploughing. It was a team effort and the calming silence was what Niki needed.

As she watered the tree, the leaves curled towards her, almost as if they were trying to suffocate or hug her. She stepped aside, blaming the wind. But the touch of the leaves was cold—cold enough to pass for a dead body. She gritted her teeth.

“Is the laurel tree attackin’ you or something?” Techno asked.

“It seems that way,” she answered, looking back at the now motionless tree.

“Mother Nature fights back in the most mysterious ways.”

“Don’t say that, it’s just the wind,” she said half-heartedly, though there was some fear to her words.

He stayed quiet and eyed the tree again. “Did you contribute to global warming and cause the ice caps to melt in another life?”

Her muscles tensed. Panic gripped her throat. He knew. How did he know? No one is supposed to know about her other lives, she was supposed to keep it a secret—

“Niki?” Techno said, uncertain. He got up from the floor. “Niki, it was a joke. Are you okay?”

It was a joke. A joke. A simple joke not related to anything. He didn’t know. He couldn’t have. It was fine. She was just paranoid, affected by the little hours of sleep.

“I’m okay,” she whispered, scared to raise her voice any louder.

“I didn’t realise global warming was a sensitive spot,” he attempted to ease the tension and her lip upturned. At least he was trying.

“Throwing waste into the ocean *is* one of my past-times,” she joked yet it fell flat by her tone.

“Knew it,” he said, grinning.

She carried on gardening, willing herself to overlook any of what just happened. Techno did all the work for the hour as she watered everything, but not because she didn’t *want* to help—Techno wouldn’t let her. He had seen her attempt to use the clippers for the hedge and almost died on the spot. So, she was banned from touching anything but the watering can.

Despite her lack of contribution, she had fun. The corrupted shadows of her void were long forgotten.

* * *

T e c h n o

P.E was entertaining. And this had absolutely *nothing* to do with how it was just an hour of Techno harassing Skeppy with a dodgeball. The teacher had told them to get into teams of two and Skeppy immediately rushed towards him.

“It’s you, glue stick guy,” Skeppy said, eyes narrowed.

Techno sighed. “I did not live for sixteen years just to be called ‘glue stick guy’.”

“I don’t care, you’re my teammate,” he announced, taking the dodgeball out of Techno’s hands.

“Where’s your other friend?” Techno asked.

“Bad’s in a different P.E set.”

Accepting defeat with his new teammate, Techno followed him to the corner of the hall.

“So, what are we supposed to do?”

Leave it to Skeppy to not listen to what his teacher had assigned for their lesson. Techno rolled his eyes and pointed at the dodgeball in Skeppy’s hands. “Try to hit me,” he said.

Skeppy frowned. “The task is that easy?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s easy,” Techno bit back, readying his position against the wall.

Skeppy attempted to copy his stance and failed. He threw forward the dodgeball, and despite being a short distance away from Techno, managed to miss. Techno didn’t even have to dodge.

“Do you accept constructive criticism?” Techno asked, smug.

“No.”

“You’re bad.”

Skeppy then missed his shot again.

The rest of their lesson went similarly. When it was Techno turn to throw dodgeballs, Skeppy’s yells echoed the sports hall even before the ball had left Techno’s hands. And when it eventually did, the yells turned to screams. Being hit to the head apparently hurt.

“This really says a lot about society,” Techno said.

Skeppy glared at him as he rubbed his forehead. “What does that even *mean*?”

“Just pick up the ball.”

It took four more hits to the head for Skeppy to finally snap.

“Okay, that’s it, you’re training me next lesson.”

Techno stopped in his movement. He wasn’t expecting that. “Now why would I do that?”

“I’ll pay you—”

“You won’t.”

“—in exposure.”

“That’s even worse.”

Though, as Skeppy proceeded to beg him for training, he thought of how enjoyable it would be to mess with the guy who self-proclaimed ‘trolled’ everyone. He wasn’t one for idioms, but Skeppy having a taste of his own medicine sounded nice. Plus, the guy was horrible at dodgeball and they *were* teammates.

“Fine.”

Skeppy paused his rant. “Fine what?”

Techno rolled his eyes. “I’ll train you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, now stand against the wall,” he ordered, patting the dodgeball in his grip.

Skeppy did so but with suspicion. “Why?”

“It’s time to teach you some dodging techniques,” he said.

“Oh God.”

It was like everyone used to say—it wasn’t a proper P.E lesson unless someone needed to be taken to medical. Well, no one said that but Techno sure laughed as Skeppy received nothing but a glass of water for his concussion.

* * *

Techno was a hundred and fifty pages into memorising the entire ‘The Art of War’ book Kristin had gifted him. If you asked him why he was doing this, he’d give you a generic answer about how it was a fascinating piece of literature—which it was—but that wouldn’t be the real reason. Instead of his desire to memorise and read at such a speed stemming from entertainment, it came from fear. Fear that Kristin would rip the book away from him, laugh in his face, scoff at him for even *believing* the book was his.

After all, what did he do to deserve a gift from this family? He had barely sat down to any of their meals, sometimes stayed silent as they asked him simple questions, and couldn’t look Phil in the eyes.

He didn’t know why it bothered him. Normally, he wasn’t bothered by how he acted; it was part of his second skin, his instincts and go-to behaviour whenever moving into a new foster family. He never grew anxious at nights, overthinking the possibility that Phil would one day snap at him, that Kristin’s kindness was all an act and Wilbur hated him more than he let on. But with the Crafts, he couldn’t stop feeling *scared*.

Techno can’t be scared, he shouldn’t be. He was Technoblade, the one that never died, the cockroach of Kinoko Foster Care, always surviving the most brutal houses they put him through, remaining a problem for them despite their attempts of his removal. He didn’t get scared.

Yet now, with the book in his hands, he was terrified.

He gulped and picked up the other book by his side. Reading about Greek symbols and their meanings thankfully transferred no emotions to Techno.

Kristin slid open the glass door into the living room, her face flushed from the cold weather in the garden. A raven feather had lodged itself in her hair.

She noticed him eyeing the new accessory on her head and chuckled. “Oh, I just came from the birdhouse,” she explained, gesturing to the shed-like building in the garden.

“You have a birdhouse?”

“Well, it’s more of a shed but Phil built it for me,” Kristin said as she plucked the raven feather from her hair. “Though, with how Wilbur is in there half the time with the birds, we have joint-custody.”

He nodded and glanced back down to his book. Techno frowned as he recognised one of the symbols on the page. He looked back up, his eyes glued to the chain of Kristin’s hidden necklace. The mark of Thanatos. Why did she have a necklace with the symbol of the God of Death? He didn’t expect her to have such a morbid taste in jewellery. But he supposed not everyone had the same outlook on life and death.

“Oh, before I forget, Wilbur is looking for you. He’s in his room,” Kristin said before she walked into the kitchen.

Not wanting Wilbur to have another tantrum, Techno put the books back into his bag and went upstairs. He usually avoided going into Wilbur's room; the cluttered decorations, posters on the walls, medals hung from hooks and pictures of him and his parents framed on his bedside table... it made Techno feel *things*. Jealousy, envy and spite, to name a few. He had never had a room that looked so lived in and yet Wilbur did. Wilbur came into this world loved, a room prepared for him, whilst Techno was nothing but a nuisance, a problem no one had the heart or patience to deal with.

Burying everything that radiated off him as he knocked on Wilbur's door, he stepped inside with a blank expression. "Kristin said you needed to see me."

Wilbur paused the video game currently playing on his PC and turned in his chair. "Technoblade! I have a proposal for you."

"Last time you said that you tried to trade me for a bag of Percy Pig's," Techno drawled out, glowering at him. The trip to the shopping mall last month was eventful—especially for the poor cashier in the sweets shop who had to go through Wilbur's negotiation.

"You just give off pig energy," Wilbur defended, pointing at Techno's hair.

"Say your proposal before I go back downstairs."

"Okay! Okay," Wilbur exclaimed before grabbing a bag. "Do you want to come to Tesco's with me?"

Techno frowned. Despite living in the UK for years now, their supermarkets were all the same to him. But he knew that if he voiced this aloud and *dared* to compare Aldi to Tesco's, then he'd be on the receiving end of death threats.

"Why?" he asked.

"Uh," Wilbur stuttered. "Bonding."

His frown deepened. "Bonding?"

"Brotherly bonding."

"We're not brothers."

Wilbur clutched his chest dramatically. "I'm wounded," he croaked out, "I'm hurt—" and then he fell to the floor, hitting his head on the corner of the table. "Ow!"

Techno laughed quietly. "I can't say it wasn't deserved."

Wilbur glared from where he refused to move from the floor. "Come with me to Tesco's, you prick. We're buying stuff."

"*You're* buying stuff," Techno corrected and waited for Wilbur's inevitable disapproval, though it never came. "Alright then, let's go."

Techno had only been in this town for a month and the trip ended with him being permanently banned from *ever* stepping foot inside the supermarket again. Wilbur ran away quick enough to avoid being tackled by security.

Apparently, theft was a crime. But the strawberry laces he stole made it worth it.

“What now?” Techno asked as the two hid in the back of an alleyway with a bag of stolen sweets and a random traffic cone they took whilst they ran.

Wilbur stopped trying to throw Smarties into the hole at the top of the cone. “Have you ever played ‘TF2’?”

“No,” he answered, chewing another strawberry lace.

“If we manage to get home with this traffic cone *without* being arrested or caught by Dad, then we’re playing ‘TF2’ in my room.”

Techno tilted his head for a moment. He hadn’t played any video games in years, not since the house that allowed him to use the Xbox on occasion. “Deal.”

Even though he hadn’t even heard of ‘TF2’ before, he destroyed Wilbur at the game just by backstabbing him every time—playing Spy did lengths to the ‘brotherly bonding’ Wilbur wanted in the first place. But something told Techno that being violently threatened with creative combinations of British slang and swearwords was a way Wilbur showed affection.

* * *

Techno thought he was being subtle with how he avoided Phil, but according to everyone else in the house, it was obvious. It wasn’t because he was scared of Phil—quite the opposite actually—but it was more because he didn’t know what to do around him.

He sighed and took out his phone. He had been teaching Niki how phones and texting worked ever since she told him she didn’t know how to use one, so he might as well take advantage of this.

Niki:

Technoblade: Do you call your parents mom and dad?

Niki: Yes.

Technoblade: Oh.

Do I need to do that?

Niki: No.

Technoblade: What if they force me?

Niki: Then call them papa and mama, a loophole and it sounds funny.

Technoblade: Do I look like a rich French child in the 1800s?

Actually, don't answer that.

Niki: Don't worry, you're fine. I don't think there were any pink-haired French people from the 1800s.

The 1900s however—

Technoblade: Don't finish that train of thought.

A knock came from his door and he put his phone down. Phil opened his bedroom door and he sat upright to hide the stiffness in his shoulders. Techno didn't realise how much he hid about himself in this house; when he smiled, when he laughed a *real* laugh, when he was interested in something. The only thing he didn't hide was anger. But that was all he knew.

"Hey, I was just wondering if you wanted to hang downstairs with me," Phil said, hesitantly.

He hated how nice this house was. He couldn't find any moral reason to say no to him. With their patient smiles, overbearing tolerance with his weird behaviours and awkwardness, and persistence to not let him feel left out, it was hard to dislike them—to reject their advances and attempts of connection.

This house disrupted everything Techno learnt from the system. They weren't violent, they weren't here to *save* him from his own impulses, they didn't infantilise him or treat him like glass. They were a normal family waiting by the doorstep with open arms.

"And do what?" Techno eventually asked.

Phil adjusted where he stood by the doorframe. "Do you like anime?"

He controlled the part of him that perked up. "Why?"

"Do you want to watch a series with me?" Phil asked.

It was clear what Phil was trying to do; to bond with the boy he was fostering. He wouldn't say a *son* he was fostering since Phil didn't act like that around him. He treated him differently than Wilbur but not in a malicious or neglectful way—just *different*.

The way Phil still cut off the crusts for both of their school lunch sandwiches yet didn't kiss Techno's forehead for goodnight and rather stuck with a nod from a suitable distance. Phil

asked him things any other foster parents wouldn't care about, the topics that ranged past the normal small talk. He didn't know how to describe it, but it wasn't a fatherly relationship.

Techno realised he had kept Phil waiting for an answer. "Sure," he said, growing warm at how Phil's face brightened. "As long as it's not 'Sword Art Online'."

"Ah, did season two ruin it for you as well?"

His lip twitched upwards. "Yep."

He followed Phil downstairs and immediately sat closest to the tub of popcorn placed on the coffee table. Techno settled into the couch—God forbid he'd call it a sofa—and tried to get his shoulders to relax against the cushions.

Phil sat on the other end of the couch and switched on 'One Punch Man'. "Be glad that Wilbur is out with Kristin or he'd force you to watch Hamilton right now."

He watched silently, looking over at Phil as he laughed over a scene. He bit his lip, not sure whether he should voice the thoughts pestering his head.

"Should I call you 'Dad' or not?" he blurted out.

Phil choked on his popcorn, sending the man heaving over a single cornel of toffee. Techno reached over to hit his back, but it seemed to make it worse.

"I'm fine," Phil said, still choking, "I'm fine."

Techno fidgeted in his seat. He didn't anticipate *that* when he thought of asking that question, maybe some anger or frustration, but not near-death caused by popcorn.

"What do you feel most comfortable calling me?" Phil asked when he finally stopped choking.

He hugged his arms around himself, unsure. "I don't know."

"What do you view me as?" Phil continued, voice soft and composed.

"Not a father," he said, quieter.

"That's okay," Phil reassured, the softness on his face not dimming.

"Maybe a landlord then," Techno mused and Phil's face fell.

"Don't associate me with landlords."

Techno huffed a short laugh. "My kidnapper?"

"You are in this house legally, Techno," Phil argued, amused.

Techno. The nickname was back.

“A friend,” he muttered, a notion of a smile on his lips. “I view you as a friend.”

Phil stilled and his eyes crinkled. “Then call me Phil then,” he said, sincere. “You don’t have to call me ‘Dad’.”

Techno nodded, grateful he didn’t turn down Phil’s offer to watch anime with him downstairs. He laid back into the couch, his shoulders no longer aching with tension and anxiety. He shovelled another piece of popcorn into his mouth, content.

But then he remembered something else he wanted to ask Phil.

“Can I plant some vegetables in the garden?”

Phil didn’t choke on his popcorn this time, but still gulped down on his drink. He was shocked—probably due to not expecting the kid with a criminal record and violent reputation to want a garden out of everything—but agreed, nonetheless.

What Phil *didn’t* know was that his allowance of this garden would start a six-month-long phase of Techno maintaining a potato farm with the occasional flowers depending on the season. To put it simply, it was hell for everyone involved. At least they never had to buy bagged potatoes for Sunday dinner though.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

* * *

T e c h n o

It had been four months and Techno was still not any closer to obtaining a dog in his household. No matter how many times he wistfully stared at the pet stores from a distance, hoping for *someone* to notice his interest—because he'd rather die than admit aloud his need for another Floof—it never worked. Even when he brought up dogs to Kristin, it only started a heated debate between her and Wilbur about whether dogs were better than cats.

Now, Techno was no cat-hater but he wanted Floof back. A nice replacement for the little white dog he could easily pick up and parade around. Just a fluffy dog that would sit in his lap as he read or played Bedwars on the computer he shared with Wilbur. Not a cat.

A ball almost hit Techno in the face but he dodged it in the last second. It was easy to lose focus in P.E, especially when Skeppy refused to get any good at dodgeball.

“I almost hit you this time!” Skeppy exclaimed as he picked up the ball from the floor.

“Keyword: almost,” Techno replied, dryly.

Skeppy threw the ball again and Techno caught it, grinning. He began to sulk again like he usually did whenever Techno bested him at the simple sport of dodgeball.

“Come on,” Techno said. “We’ll be late for science if you keep this up.”

“Since when do you care about being late?”

Techno avoided his eyes. “I prefer not to be a victim to the school corridors when it’s crowded.”

Skeppy stayed silent as they walked to the changing rooms confusing Techno, who expected the other to make a jab at him. “I’ll be your meat shield,” he said after they’d both gotten changed.

“Heh?”

“If anyone comes close to touching you, I’ll attack,” Skeppy continued.

“No offence but—”

“Whatever you’re going to say will still offend me.”

“—ok yeah, you’re right,” Techno sighed.

Skeppy beamed and held open the door for him. “Trust me, the corridors will be fine.”

At least, out of the many times Skeppy had lied or fabricated the truth to any extent, that didn’t apply to now. He stuck to his word and stood in between the upcoming crowd and Techno as they navigated their way to the science block.

“Thanks,” Techno muttered quietly, hoping Skeppy didn’t hear it so it wouldn’t fuel the boy’s already overbearing ego.

“What was that?” Skeppy teased. “I didn’t quite hear what you—”

“Shut it before I tell Miss that you’re the one who blew up her Bunsen Burner last week.”

“You wouldn’t,” Skeppy reputed and Techno quirked an eyebrow daringly. “Okay, you would.”

Skeppy sat down on his normal seat in the class, to the right beside Bad. Techno hesitated before sitting down on the other side of Bad—a fairly new arrangement but one that Bad originally encouraged him to take.

“Hey, how are you?” Bad asked and Techno began his recollection of beating the living shit out of Skeppy during P.E. The two always began science with some type of catch-up or small-talk conversation, which Techno only entertained because it was Bad initiating it—the older boy was too kind to say no to.

“Bad, can I look at your homework?” Skeppy asked.

“No,” Bad answered.

“Why not?” he squawked, offended.

“Because you’re just going to copy my answers.”

“That’s not true.”

Bad’s face furrowed. “You literally did that yesterday.”

“It was just a coincidence we had the same answers.”

“Hm, sure,” he teased, smiling at the irritation spanning over Skeppy’s face.

Skeppy huffed and leaned over the desk. “Technoblade, have you—?”

“No chance,” he interrupted, causing Bad to laugh.

“You’re such a bully.”

Techno turned to face him and said in the most monotone and dead-panned voice he could muster, "Your words cut deep."

Even though science class never failed to entertain Techno, he felt sick to his stomach as soon as his teacher put up an equation on the whiteboard he needed to balance. She always picked on him whenever the class refused to answer, so he quickly excused himself and left the classroom. Phil had gotten him a bathroom pass from the school so he abused this privilege whenever he could.

He pushed open the gender-neutral bathroom within the science block because he'd rather die than go into the boy's toilets—it always had toilet seats missing and smashed sinks for some reason. Though, he froze as the door closed behind him. Stifled cries quietly echoed throughout the bathroom.

Okay, Techno could deal with human interactions (that was a lie) but dealing with an upset person was where he drew the line. He wasn't an emotionless piece of shit but he didn't know *how* to deal with this. Offer them a tissue under the stall door? Rub their back as they cried? He didn't know.

No one taught him how to comfort people, no one *ever* comforted him, so how was he supposed to know?

The door unlocked and Niki walked out. Her eyes were red and puffy, eyeliner smudged.

"Technoblade," she exhaled sharply, obviously not expecting him to be here.

"Um." He fiddled with his hands behind his back. "Are you okay?" She didn't answer. He thinned his lips. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

"Wanna skip the rest of the day and go to the café?" he suggested instead.

Niki wiped her eyes with a tissue and shrugged. "Yeah, let's go."

They jumped the gates, Techno holding her bag as she did so, and walked to the local café. The two sat on their normal table. The waitress didn't bat an eye at Techno's school uniform as he ordered for the both of them whilst Niki fixed her makeup in the bathroom.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

Victim No.2:

Skeppy: yo, did you just bail on science?

Technoblade: Yes.

Skeppy: WIHTOUT ME????

Technoblade: Yes.

Skeppy: you made Bad cry

Technoblade: Well, if Bad wants to join me, he can.

Skeppy: I hate how I can't even emotionally manipulate you

Technoblade: Pay attention in class. Those chemical equations need balancing.

Skeppy: fu

Niki returned to the table; her face less red though her eyes still looked saddened. She took a sip of her hot chocolate as Techno remained silent.

“We can talk about something else if you want,” he said.

She bit her lip. “No, no I want to,” she said and sighed into her hands. “My history class is very misogynistic,” she revealed, voice rough yet still soft. “And other things.” Techno slid the tissue packet closer to her, just in case. “They transferred me from geography to history today and it was an… experience.”

“Is the content misogynistic or the people in your class?” he asked, trying to remember any cases of sexism in the L’manberg stuff Wilbur forced him to proofread for him. Thankfully, Techno did another history module instead of the Essempi Kingdom.

“It’s just how the historians handled certain things,” Niki explained, hurt wallowing in her narrowed eyes. “Did you know that Nick Chu is actually rumoured to be a woman?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if she was,” Techno said and Niki tilted her head at him. “What? It’s not uncommon for historians to favour a male-dominated narrative in history, reducing and erasing women’s roles and overall existence. Like with Martha Whiteley or Isabel Emslie.”

The waitress returned and placed the tub of chocolate ice cream in front of Niki.

“Ice cream?” Niki questioned, confused.

Techno rested his back in the chair. “It’s for you,” he clarified. “Isn’t that what you give people when they cry?”

Niki lowered her head. “I wouldn’t know.”

He didn’t know either. Another thing they had in common.

“Well, now it’s a tradition,” Techno said, pushing the spoon closer to her hand.

An inkling of a smile resided on her lips and to Techno, the future consequences of skipping school were worth it.

* * *

He didn't expect the consequences of skipping school to bother him as soon as he entered the house, though.

"Techno, why is it that I got a call from the school saying that you were absent from some of your classes today?" Phil asked. It was almost as if the man had been waiting for him—which was probably true.

"Because I wasn't there," he said bluntly.

Phil made a noise of shock, not expecting honesty. "Where were you then?"

"Elsewhere."

"Mate, please, was it at least a safe area or...?"

Techno frowned and walked closer to the living room. He didn't want to think the worst of Phil, but his foster parents had a pattern of assuming the worst whenever Techno wasn't in their view. They'd immediately default to thinking the moment he wasn't under their surveillance that he stood in dark alleys, exchanging illegal substances, getting into fights or stealing, all things you would ignorantly expect if you saw his file. Like house number six.

He remembered the first time it happened, how he defended himself but to no avail. It was only the eventual anger in his voice and ignorant fear in his foster mother's face that made them *listen* to him.

"What do you mean by that?" Techno asked with his shoulders squared, bracing himself for the answer.

He was so stupid to believe a foster family wouldn't criminalise him, think him to be this—

"I told the school you had to leave for a dentist appointment so I need to know if you were seen by anyone when you were out. Because I'm in deep shit if you were."

Oh.

The constraint pressing against his chest eased.

"I was in a café," Techno said slowly. "It was empty at that hour, plus Skeppy's dad owns it so it's fine."

Phil nodded, relieved. "Good."

Techno didn't really know what to do, whether to thank him for getting him in trouble at school or to apologise for skipping class in the first place. He wasn't sure. Phil was supposed

to be shouting at him, scolding him for not being where he was meant to be, punishing him, taking away the items he had gifted him, the necessities he bought. But none of that happened.

Instead, Phil nodded again and said, “Dinner’s ready soon so I’ll leave a plate outside your door if you don’t want to join us,” before leaving Techno by himself in the living room.

He had only been with this family for four months. He shouldn’t be feeling like *this*. Normally, he figured out early on the motives of each house, why they chose to foster, if it was a saviour complex, replacement they needed, some money grab or desire for some extra hands around the house. The Crafts didn’t tick any of those boxes, didn’t raise any red flags. They just wanted to bring a child from a broken background into a safe environment. From Kristin’s small gifts, Wilbur’s forceful ‘brotherly-bonding time’ and Phil’s considerate nature, it *was* a safe environment. Something he had never had the luck to experience before. No bottles smashed against the walls, glass scratches on his bare feet; no threats coated in misguided affection or misplaced trust. It was different here.

But why Techno out of all the other kids? He didn’t deserve a family or such kind treatment. There were still days he rejected Kristin’s conversations, Wilbur’s efforts to make him play videogames together and Phil’s attempts to get Techno to join them for dinner meals.

So why him?

For the third time today, he did not know.

After eating breakfast alone in his room the next day, he walked downstairs with a book in his hand. He had a routine of reading with noise-cancelling headphones on whilst seated on the couch furthest away from everything else. It was peaceful and rarely anyone interrupted this. Well, besides now.

Kristin walked into his line of sight, a warm smile upon her lips and a cup in her hands. He took the headphones off and she set down the cup on the coaster to his right. It was coffee, prepared just how he liked it. He didn’t realise she had remembered how many sugars he put in each time.

“I feel like every time I see you Techno you’re reading,” Kristin said, a light-hearted tone to her teasing.

Again with the nickname, with *Techno*. It was spoken with such endearment and casual care, causing his chest to squeeze each time he heard it.

“You gave me the book,” he said, gesturing to the cover. It was a children’s book of Greek mythology, one he jokingly complained about since he wanted the adult version. She gifted it to him after she saw him reading about Greek symbols. “Plus, there’s nothing else I can do.”

She sat down on the couch nearest to him. “What about a sport?”

He scrunched up his face.

Kristin muffled her laughter into her hand. “Not rugby or football, don’t worry. What about a dexterity and tactic-based sport like archery or fencing? No need for muddy fields or gritted shoes.”

He bookmarked his page and looked up at Kristin. Fencing. There was no permitted human contact during the sport and you could beat the shit out of an opponent with a violent weapon.

“Fencing sounds good,” he said hesitantly, still unsure over when he should voice his interests.

Kristin’s face lit up. “I can take you and Wilbur to a local fencing place later if you want to; you can test it out then.”

She wasn’t subtle with what she was doing—trying to get them to be closer. Bringing the *family* closer. He sighed, ignoring the part of him, which was slowly growing bigger, that liked that. The part that warmed up to her endeavours of making him feel included and welcome. But maybe this heat was just an effect of being around her.

Kristin confused him. Shadows seemed to follow her, light disappearing from rooms and cold excreting in its place. But when she was in close proximity, close enough to hold her hand or brush against her shoulder, a staggering warmth appeared. The cold became tolerable in the creased wrinkles beside her eyes, her tight smiles and hearty chuckles. Those were warm enough.

“Sure,” he agreed and her grin widened.

Her necklace glowed again and it couldn’t have been a trick of the light because there was no *light*.

She flinched and placed her hand over the symbol. “Oh, I forgot- work, uh,” she panicked for a moment, her shoulders tense and brightness dimmed. Kristin rushed to grab the case she always brought with her. “When I come back later, do you still want to go?”

He frowned. Each time she returned from work, she looked drained, dead almost. Her job seemed exhausting.

“We can do it another time when you don’t have work that day,” Techno offered and her grip on the case loosened momentarily.

Her shoulders partly relaxed and that blinding smile was back. “Okay, yeah we can do that.”

Techno opened the children’s Greek mythology book again when she left. The cold slowly departed from the room and he turned to the next page. Chthonic Gods, residents of the Underworld.

* * *

N i k i

Niki walked home from the café with the red plastic spoon Techno gave her for the ice cream gripped in her hand. Sure, it was a piece of recyclable cutlery but it was the first time someone *comforted* her—someone other than her family. Techno didn’t have to skip school with her, distract her from the horrible history lesson she had about her first life, of Calypso and W. Soot; he didn’t have to do anything of that. But he did. So she kept the spoon as a little souvenir.

Tubbo was on the sofa with Benson the duck cuddled on his lap when she entered the living room.

“Did you ditch today?” he asked from the second he noticed her.

The tips of her ears reddened. “Partly.”

“Why?”

She bit on her inner check, debating on if she should tell the truth or a counterfeit version of it. The concern in Tubbo’s face troubled her. “I had a panic attack in school,” she confessed.

“Oh,” he said quietly, his hand stopped petting Benson’s back. “Are you better now?”

She squeezed tighter on the spoon hidden in her hand. “Yeah.”

“Was it because of Germany?”

Niki winced.

Even though Tubbo didn’t know about her curse—she begged her parents not to tell him—he somehow came to the conclusion that she was connected to the German mafia because of her tattoo. No matter how many times she denied it, her shitty and equally as fake explanations for her Zagreus tattoo didn’t deter him.

But it wasn’t because of Germany and the man this time. Despite the centuries that had passed since her first life, since she stupidly joined a Revolution and died for the cause, the pain didn’t cease. Why did the town she moved to have to be *her* history? It was a cruel joke by the Fates. Her contribution to the war effort had been diminished by historians who knew *nothing* about what really happened, her name had been changed, her identity stolen, and for what?

History treated their resistance against an overtaxing, authoritarian monarchy as a joke. A futile attempt of unnecessary change. They misunderstood W. Soot, glorified Tobias and vilified Tommy—years prior she would have agreed with this tarnished outlook, but now... now she knew Tommy was just a boy who wanted his country, his *home*, to survive.

It was fucked. All of it.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked,” Tubbo muttered.

Niki rubbed her tattoo over her sleeve and shook her head. “No, it’s fine.”

Guilt still flushed over Tubbo.

She sighed and sat down next to him. She knew he was trying to befriend her or act like a younger brother. Neither of them understood how to navigate through this adoption. She was only two years older than him so that didn’t help either.

“Have you ever baked cookies before?” she asked.

“No,” Tubbo said, continuing to stroke Benson. “Dad doesn’t trust me with anything in the kitchen after I tried to make a petrol bomb.”

What the fuck?

“A petrol bomb?”

“Yeah,” he replied, nonchalantly. “It was a dare in Chemistry.”

Niki paused. “I’m just going to pretend you never said that and instead offer for you to help me make cookies. No petrol or bombs included.”

Tubbo jumped off the sofa, accidentally waking up the duck as he did so. “Sure.”

If you had told Niki that baking chocolate-chip cookies with Tubbo ended with him in hospital, then she *would* have believed you. It was a probable consequence whenever Tubbo was involved.

During the time they waited for them to rise in the oven, he showed her the CS:GO knives he managed to secretly make in his DT classes. Then he proceeded to do a knife handling trick and stabbed himself in the foot.

When he returned from the hospital, he found Niki rummaging through the draws in the living room cabinets.

“Tubbo! Come here,” Niki shouted. “I need to know where your passport is.”

“Stop trying to sign me up for rehab centres!” he shouted back.

“That online game is the reason you had a knife in your *foot!*”

“It hardly scratched it,” he grumbled.

“Mum had to take you to A&E, stop under-doing it.”

It turned out that Las Nevadas Gambling Rehab Centre was expensive so Niki gave up with reforming her brother’s problems and instead resorted to her usual mentality of ‘Let it die’.

Her duty of being an older sister didn't apply to now.

* * *

Niki walked in her bedroom, ready to procrastinate another piece of maths homework, but stopped as soon as she entered the room. Tommy Soot sat on the edge of her bed.

Tommy.

He shouldn't- he shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be alive.

"How are you—" her voice broke as she backed into the door. This couldn't be real. She was awake, *conscious*, none of this should be happening. "How are you here?"

A healthy boy with bright blonde curls, a clean face fresh from damage and ruined inclination, stared at her.

Tommy scowled, his brows furrowed and nose scrunched up in a child-like fashion. An expression that once irritated her, with his immaturity and lack of sense, but now it brought tears to her eyes. It was so *him*, these actions, this behaviour. It was Tommy. The boy she once loved like a little brother.

"We agreed to meet here, Nihachu," he said sharply, yet not unkindly.

She flinched. *Nihachu*. Her first name and splintered identity coated in cycles of abandonment and self-inflicted misdemeanour.

She shook her head, confused. This was still her bedroom. He was in her *bedroom*. Alive and well.

"You promised to fix my uniform before my brother kills me for tearing it," Tommy continued, eyes widening as they'd normally do when he wanted something from someone. Such a mischievous act, a naïve and innocent one—before the times Tommy would need to beg for people to believe him and trust his words, but still to no success, before his yearnings for cooperation turned to unreciprocated disappointment and violations of trust.

And just like that, with such a guilty reminder of the boy Niki had let down and watched crumble into himself, her bedroom disappeared. The decorations on the wall sunk to muddy floors, the ceiling scattered into a tranquil sunset and azure breeze.

Black walls surrounded them, a border concocting their own forested land of desired independence and freedom; layers of black and yellow stripes protected their home. A flag waved in the light wind; *their* flag.

L'manberg. It was L'manberg.

Instead of that lively and well boy sitting on a bed, a child soldier sat on a tree log. Dirt and blood mattered Tommy's golden locks, scraps roughed his nose and his face was too slim to be healthy. A royal blue blazer, embezzled with auric epaulettes and lapels laid in Tommy's hand. There was a rip in the fabric.

This couldn't be possible. None of this should be *here*. L'manberg was long gone, reduced to rubble and rebuilt decades later into something else, something grander and more stable. And Tommy—

He should be dead. It was the only solution. He wasn't in her dreams, her void with the rest of the cursed. He died in exile all those centuries ago, never to be reborn again.

Tears swelled in her eyes as she gazed at him, the boy she viewed as family before everything. Before the strain of war and heavy remorse that burdened her ever since his exile. She shouldn't have been silent as he was ripped from the lands he fought to protect. But she was. She let it happen.

But now he sat in front of her. Breathing.

"Tommy?" she whispered, still in disbelief. She was awake and yet her reality submerged her into *this*.

"As much as I appreciate this," he paused to gesture at her, "exciting reaction from just my presence, can we get on with it?" Tommy ruffled the uniform in his arms and picked up the sewing kit by his side.

She knew this was fake, something her mind had envisioned or imagined. A side-effect of the centuries she had in the void—the memories that stayed, resistant to repression or forgetfulness. All because of her lack of rebirths.

But just because it was false didn't refrain it from hurting. She missed him, she missed Tommy. The reckless incidents he would cause with his juvenile vitality and passion for experiencing all aspects of life.

This was L'manberg. That was the tree W. Soot used to sing under with everyone crowded around, the van Tommy and Tobias deemed as the drug van despite Niki's medical supplies being the only things stored in there. The flower farms Tommy kept watered, Tobias' tunnels and borrows, the pastel-coloured uniform she made Fundy under W. Soot's orders just to tease him. It was all here. *They* were all here.

It looked peaceful. There were no rigged explosives under their lands, no threats from King George and no paranoid leader with their sanity broken by battles in their ranks.

Her home. This was what replaced her bedroom. Her first home.

"Nihachu!" Tommy called, bouncing up from the log and grabbing her hands.

She recoiled backwards.

His hands were *warm*. There was blood flowing through his veins and air in his chest. He was alive. Tears fell from her face.

“Oh, sorry, uh,” he let go but she chased after his touch. Her little brother, the soldier who fought beside her, and one who braided her hair when the tremors in her hands made it impossible. He was here. “I can get Eret to sow it for me if you want, they won’t mind—”

More tears soaked her cheeks. This was before Eret’s betrayal, before they gained independence legally—the beginning of the Revolution. But it was muddled, corrupted. Tommy’s bloodied appearance mimicked the harsh reality of the Wars when the famines wrecked their morale and health. Harm induced long after their declaration of independence.

“It’s fine, Tommy,” she proclaimed, tightly lipped as she tried to keep her sorrow at bay. “Really, I’m fine.” He frowned and handed over his torn uniform.

She remembered this memory. Tommy had ripped his uniform on a tree branch after Tobias dared him to climb the Lemon Tree. His knees were scraped under his breeches, but he didn’t tell anyone until it bled through the fabric and Niki patched him up later in the night. They shared roasted pinecones over the campfire as she cleaned his knees. He cried a little from the pain, but she swore to never tell anyone. He didn’t want his so-called reputation as a ‘big man’ to be tarnished.

It was a happy memory. Though a short-lived and bittersweet one.

Despite the calming evening between the two, with the trees savouring their spirited laughter and absence of conflict, the next day King George declared war.

Swallowing the pain lodged in her throat and rivers of unshed tears, she pulled Tommy closer to her and they settled on the dry grass. She let him ramble like he usually did as she fixed his uniform. The lively rants of how annoying his brother’s overprotectiveness was, how the rain ruined his farm and the intricacies of Tobias’ inventions.

Even with Tommy’s pestering yet endearing presence, Niki couldn’t stop the poisoned thoughts from seeping into her head.

He left me too.

As she mourned the death of her tragic leader and best friend, alone and depressed, Tommy busied himself with other things—like burning down King George’s absent properties and instigating conflict between the Essempi Kingdom and President Tobias. Over the arising disputes, she was forgotten about.

No one comforted her as tears drowned her broken spirit and hatred for the lands she swore to protect and honour. No one mourned as Ogygia island claimed her citizenship just because she expressed her love for the people she would and *did* die for. No one cared, not a single person.

Her misery dampened the royal blue fabric and the scenery that once brought her solace and friendship—their unfinished symphony—faded back to an empty bedroom.

With no more figures of her past in her proximity, Niki had never felt so alone. She could still feel the warmth of his hands in her own.

Through her blurred vision, she noticed something. Her closet door wasn't closed like it normally was; instead, it was ajar. Corners of post-it notes mocked her. She rushed forward, hauling the closet door open.

Names littered the inside closet doors. Myths of tragedy, love, fraught relationships and death covered every possible surface.

The scornful words of W. Soot in that corrupted void, of her inability to be loved back, and the dying heat from Tommy's hands fuelled the rage delving deep inside of her.

As blood from her bitten cheek soured her mouth, she tore down all the myths with happy endings. Every myth with an ounce of happiness or enjoyment.

Though, one myth glared back at her. Eros and Psyche.

Her hand shook as she plucked it off the door. She wasn't Psyche in this life, although it did suit her first life. With how Psyche's unconditional love for Eros, her blind love, ruined it all just because she wanted *more*. But at least Eros loved her back.

Ripped pieces of the note fell to the floor.

It was getting worse—the nightmares, sleep paralysis, shaking in her hands and tainted daydreams of dead memories blended into reality.

Niki wanted to guess her myth. She wanted to understand this world and the technology it produced. She yearned to never slumber in that void again and be reborn into another time, leaving her more out of touch than before. But this desire was pointless. She'd never figure it out.

Her tattoo pinched at her skin.

She needed to tell someone soon, someone who would understand and *know*. Yet trust was a fragile thing for her and there weren't any people who had earned that.

Well, all but one.

The outline of a plastic spoon in her pocket brushed against her hand.

Niki supposed she could tell him.

* * *

It took two more weeks for Niki to finally deal with it.

As soon as her knuckles bashed against Techno's front door, she immediately regretted it.

What the fuck was she *doing*? She had known Techno for a couple of months—not even half a year—and yet here she was, preparing herself to tell him the one detail of her life that never let her sleep at night. The curse that ruined *everything*. The reason she couldn't look at a brown cloak or forest fire without W. Soot or Fundy crossing her mind.

She cared for Techno and knew that for once this wasn't unrequited, but this... revealing a mythological curse that stemmed from over four centuries ago. It was too much. Would he even believe her? Let her finish explaining before being kicked out of the house for lying?

She didn't know. She didn't know what she was doing anymore.

The door opened and Phil stood in front of her. She gulped and tightly smiled. Niki had met him before because of how she usually went over to Techno's house after Enrichment and sometimes slept over in the spare room. But now facing him when she planned to blurt out *everything* today was not wise—especially when the man just gave out that aura that no matter what you said, he'd accept you.

"Oh, Niki, I wasn't expecting you. Techno's in his room if you're here for him," Phil said, welcoming her inside.

"Yeah, I just need to talk to him for a bit," she said, hands clammy by her side.

"Don't let Techno's shit hospitality stop you from raiding our kitchen if you need a drink later," he said light-heartedly.

Niki nodded. If it were different circumstances, she would've appreciated Phil's easy-going nature and chuckled.

She ran up the stairs and knocked on Techno's bedroom door.

"Wilbur, for the last time, I don't want to watch you fly an airplane in a video game—" Techno said as Niki pushed open the door. His words died on his tongue as he swivelled in his desk chair to see her standing at the doorframe. "You're not Wilbur."

"What made it so obvious?" she joked, trying to calm herself.

"Maybe your extensive lacking in the height department," he replied dryly with a subtle grin.

"You're just mad he's finally taller than you now," she said as she sat down on the lounge chair. She picked up a pillow and held it close on her lap, needing something to busy her hands with.

"Are you here for any particular reason or just want to hang out?" Techno asked, turning in his chair to face her head-on.

A quick silence filled the room. She knew the words she had to say, the confession that dried up her throat and jittered her heart. But it wouldn't leave her mouth. She had faced wars, death and centuries of isolation, she had *blood* on her hands, and yet *this* scared her.

"I need to tell you something," she stated quietly. She couldn't even look him in the eyes as she spoke. Though, his face seemed sceptical, cautious but not worried.

"What is it?" he asked.

"We're friends, right?" Niki's eyes flickered up and stared into his.

Techno frowned, his caution twisting into concern. "Yeah," he drawled out, confused. "I wouldn't let just *anyone* burst into my room and take over my favourite chair," he said. "Why?"

She hated how his confirmation of their friendship, of their care and respect for each other, didn't even lift any weight off her chest. Her heart continued to hammer against her ribcage, shattering any confidence she had prior.

"Just needed to be sure before I..." she trailed off and bit her lip to stop it from trembling. She pulled down her sleeve and angled her right forearm. Her tattoo lay exposed in the light. "Do you recognise this symbol?"

Techno leaned closer, his eyes glued to the black ink on her skin. His eyebrows furrowed. He shook his head.

Niki's chest hitched. "Zagreus, Greek God of rebirth, reincarnation and hunting."

"Why do you have that tattooed on you?" he asked, stumped.

"I didn't have a choice." She couldn't keep the bitter taste from her tone. Marked against her will for a reason she still didn't understand to this day.

She adjusted herself on the chair, her heart still pounding and hands shaking.

"I need you to promise me that you—" Niki cut herself off to compose her voice, not wanting it to waver or break, "promise me you'll believe the next words I say." His expression didn't change and ragged breaths compressed against her chest. "Please, Technoblade promise me that."

One of his eyebrows twitched. His gaze fluttered over her face as if he were analysing her, from the desperate gleam in her eyes to the stiffness in her shoulders.

"Techno," she reaffirmed, urgent.

He stilled and eventually nodded. "Okay, I... I trust you," he said, his voice uneven and vulnerable. "I'll believe you. Just say it."

Relief flooded through her. She knew how hard it was to blindly trust, to give such promises leaving you exposed to the repercussions of your own word. And yet he did it for her.

"I'm cursed," Niki bit out. "*This*," she gripped her tattooed wrist, "is my curse."

Techno stayed quiet.

She exhaled sharply. "I've had two lives, I died back in the 1500s and ever since then, I've been cursed with reincarnation. Every life I live is determined by a Greek myth. This is my second life and if I don't figure out by my twenty-first birthday, I'll die again."

His silence continued and Niki tasted iron in her mouth.

"Please say something," she begged. She needed him to believe her, to trust her like he said he would. She didn't want to feel defenceless and hopeless in this world anymore, confined to the burden on her wrist and the paranoia creeping over her shoulder just because of that *man*.

"Please," she choked, tears pricked in the corners of her eyes.

Yet, only her hastened breaths and awaiting anxiety echoed the room.

"So it's all real?" was what Techno finally said, breaking his silence. She couldn't find any disbelief, annoyance or anger on his face. Just a blank dissertation, processing what she had just revealed. "Mythology... the Gods, the stories, it's all real?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

"And you're immortal," he stated.

"I can die," she corrected shakily, "But only if I guess the wrong myth or don't guess at all."

"And you expect me to believe that just like I promised?"

Niki gulped, trying to control every part of her that just yearned to leave the room, run out into the streets and never admit this ever happened.

"Yes," she whispered.

Techno sat up straighter, his face still unreadable. "Alright."

"Alright?" she repeated.

"I believe you."

And with those simple three words, the storm inside of Niki eased. The thunder propelling her heart halted, the rain in her eyes formed a drought, and everything was okay.

She wasn't pushed aside, her worries and words ignored; she was *listened* to, acknowledged and believed.

"Really?" she wept in disbelief and Techno smiled, the corners of his mouth quipped genuinely.

“I have no reason to not believe you.”

“But- but it sounds insane, you—”

“I trust you,” he reassured.

Despite her relief, the wetness in her eyes leaked onto her cheeks. She didn’t mean to cry but it just *happened*. Out of happiness, built-up consolation and stress.

Techno got up out of his desk chair and walked closer. His hands hovered over her shoulders, almost testing her reaction. She nodded and he enclosed his arms around her, loosely hugging her to his side. “I believe you,” he repeated, softly.

She cried into his shoulder, smudging her eyeliner onto his clothes but she could tell he didn’t care. He rubbed circles into her back, the movement was awkward but caring.

This was the first time she had been hugged in months, with the last being when her adoptive parents picked her up from the airport. But this was different. This was a friend who didn’t *need* to care about her but did so anyway. This was Techno, the one who refused to speak to anyone for the first week in school yet spoke to *her*, the person who defended her in that library, ordered her ice cream just because she was sad. Someone who understood.

“I’ll help you,” he assured. “I’ll help you break this curse.”

She looked up at him with blurred vision. “You’d do that?”

“For you? Yeah.”

More tears dampened Techno’s shirt. He had said it so *casually*, words that had never been spoken to her before. She wasn’t Calypso in this life and she couldn’t have been any more grateful.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Just to clarify because of the Niki daydream/memory I put in, I changed the lore a bit so Niki was there for the original Revolution instead of how she joined the server and L’manberg after they had gained independence.

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